Section 3
Entanglement

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‘A worthwhile career for a man who is not entirely self-seeking’: service, duty and the Colonial Service during decolonization

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Writing in 1955, Kenneth Bradley, a former district officer in Northern Rhodesia and then director of the Commonwealth Institute, ended the updated edition of his Colonial Service recruitment pamphlet, *A career in the Oversea Civil Service*, with these words:

> If you agree with me that the Commonwealth and Empire are our proudest heritage, and that to serve the Colonial peoples is the greatest privilege and the finest opportunity for practical, constructive and selfless service to humanity which you are ever likely to be offered, then for you this may be only THE BEGINNING…[1]

In so doing, Bradley evoked the core quality of idealistic service, which for him stood at the heart of Colonial Service identity and mission. This updated version of the ‘white man’s burden’, repackaged for a post-war audience, continued to draw upon many of the entrenched tropes within Colonial Service lore. Duty and sacrifice in the service of others had been proclaimed the driving force behind colonial careers since the late nineteenth century, and widely celebrated as such in popular depictions of empire throughout British culture.[2] The image fostered of benign and beneficent colonial rule had always found enthusiastic support among the upper middle classes, who had dominated professional careers across empire since the late nineteenth century.[3] Bradley hoped that by stressing the enduring importance of these qualities, even as the structures of the British empire fundamentally altered, he could inspire a new generation

to take up this 'historic duty' and complete the vaunted journey towards colonial self-government in a multiracial Commonwealth.

This edition, revised from the original 1950 version, *The Colonial Service as a career*, did indeed highlight important changes in the ambition and character of colonial rule in the post-war empire.[4] Gone were images celebrating the district officer (DO) as the embodiment of colonial authority, replaced instead with photos illustrating partnership and equality between British officials and indigenous people. In a tidy metaphor for broader changes, a chapter entitled 'Empire building' had been renamed 'Nation building', and it stressed that progress towards the Commonwealth was now the fundamental objective of colonial rule. While those who responded to Bradley's rallying call would find that 'the beginning' proved far nearer to the end than anyone suspected in the mid-1950s, it is clear from the testimonies of many Colonial Service recruits in the final years of empire that his words still resonated.[5] In 1960 alone, the same year as Nigerian independence and a year before three more colonial territories followed suit, the Colonial Service made 816 new appointments to all departments across Africa, to add to the 18,000 colonial officials still serving in empire.[6]

Yet Bradley's pamphlet served a more instrumental purpose than a self-congratulatory celebration of selfless service and colonial progress. Despite the declarations of Colonial Office recruiters and retired grandees, colonial officers, unsurprisingly, were never motivated by altruistic sentiment alone. Throughout the Colonial Service's lifespan, the appeal of careers in empire rested upon a competing mix of utopian idealism and narcissistic egoism. Adventure, power, status and prospects were always as important to colonial careers as any impulse to service.[7] Concerned at sharply falling application rates across the 1950s, the Colonial Office first approached Bradley to produce an 'inspirational' piece of propaganda to convince sixth formers and undergraduates that meaningful career opportunities were still on offer.[8] Ultimately, his reassurances had little effect. By the end of the decade the Colonial Service could fill just over half the available positions each year. Once the career had forfeited its security, the Service laboured to sustain its recruitment cycle among its traditional audience. In spite of the not insignificant number of appointments, it appears that, for the majority of elite young Britons in the 1950s, empire became less important sentimentally precisely because it became less rewarding materially.[9]

It does not follow, however, that this group simply turned inwards as the empire started to be dismantled. Instead, they sought out new opportunities beyond the framework of the colonial state that would allow

them to experience life in decolonizing territories. It is no coincidence that the end of a Colonial Service career coincided with the emergence of overseas voluntary organizations, nor that, as applications fell, the numbers employed in private commerce or development initiatives increased. At first glance, these appear to highlight a rupture in the dominant ideas of service and duty, with the old guard's outdated appeal marginalized in favour of a new 'modern humanitarianism'.[10] Yet this perspective omits important strands of entanglement that ran between the colonial state and new forms of postcolonial overseas engagement. Even as many voluntary and development organizations very deliberately sought to distinguish themselves from the preceding colonial regime, they nonetheless approximated the vocabulary of service, and drew upon organizational associations that had been integral to a Colonial Service career.[11] Opportunities that at first glance seem to have disappeared with the end of Colonial Service recruitment survived well into the postcolonial period, but came to be articulated in new and innovative terms to ensure relevance for a generation that did not hold Britain's colonial connection as timeless.

Until relatively recently, accounts of British decolonization have paid little attention to how the end of empire reconfigured metropolitan culture and, in turn, was itself shaped by currents of domestic change. On the one hand, while imperial historians have unpicked every minute detail of successive governments' colonial policy, only rarely have they situated the arena of high policy within a wider popular context.[12] On the other, historians of post-1945 British history have been equally reluctant to incorporate wider global perspectives into their accounts of domestic social change. In explaining the profound transformations that followed the Second World War, accounts tend to emphasize the creation of the welfare state as the driving force behind the democratization and modernization of British society in the late twentieth century. When the empire does appear, it tends to be either as an anachronistic remnant of atrophying social hierarchies or else a costly burden that determined national decline.[13]

Efforts to move beyond these narrow parameters have delivered rich results. Since the 1980s the new imperial histories have escaped the realm of high policy to demonstrate how Britain's possession of a global empire profoundly reconfigured domestic culture and ideas of Britishness.[14] By collapsing the entrenched binary of metropole and periphery to consider 'home' and 'away' as mutually constituted, this scholarship has charted how popular conceptions of race, gender, class and nation were transformed through encounters in empire and, in turn,

shaped the relationships between local people and Britons living and working across imperial territories.[15] Even so, until the last decade the principal focus of these studies tended to extend backwards from the early twentieth century, thus giving little account to the period of decolonization. Happily, this historiographical neglect has started to be redressed through a series of groundbreaking studies that bring together the histories of the post-war and postcolonial/imperial.[16] This has allowed historians of post-1945 Britain to begin to map, in Jordanna Bailkin's elegant formulation, 'the afterlives of empire', revealing a complex mixture of continuities, dislocations and reconfigurations within decolonization's enduring imprint on metropolitan culture.[17]

The application of these approaches to studies of the Colonial Service has moved more slowly. During and beyond the lifespan of empire a wide literature has proliferated on its institutional frameworks, demographic profile and role in colonial administration; rarely does this corpus satisfactorily capture the Service's place within metropolitan culture during the period of decolonization, however.[18] Recent analyses of the ideological and cultural dynamics of the imperial civil services have delivered enlivening results, but these tend to focus on the period before 1939.[19] Long-established research traditions among scholars of African history have done much to reveal the limits of colonial authority in the field, the often insuperable gap between metropolitan expectations and local realities, and the racialized, gendered nature of colonial governance.[20] Entirely understandably, however, the focus on African contexts means that it is not always immediately clear how such perspectives connect to changing conditions in Britain. Larry Butler and Sarah Stockwell's recent edited volume on Macmillan's 'wind of change speech' refreshingly demonstrates the possibilities for fresh insight offered by exploring more carefully the ideational relationship between high policy and popular reception, and metropolitan rhetoric and its reception in African territories.[21]

To borrow and adapt Martin Shipway's formulation, by triangulating our view of the Colonial Service during the period of late colonial shift to capture the relationship between official policy, attitudes among serving officers and the Service's position within wider British culture, we gain a more textured picture of the workings – and failings – of the late colonial state, as well as how decolonization impacted domestically.[22] In so doing, the continuities and ruptures that emerged as British society adjusted to the loss of empire are brought into sharper relief.[23] As Elizabeth Buettner has recently shown, the transformative effects of decolonization resonated as strongly and deeply in Britain as they did in

newly independent African states.[24] By considering post-war British history within a transnational framework, and the history of decolonization as an important element within post-1945 British history, we can better capture how the end of empire created new possibilities for Britons to engage with the wider world, just as it closed off others.[25]

To trace these ruptures and entanglements, this chapter examines the Colonial Service's 1950s recruitment crisis to explore why relatively few responded to Bradley's entreaties. It begins by focusing upon the role and ethos of the Colonial Service after 1945. Drawing upon previously underused recruitment literature, Colonial Office interview and training reports, as well as retrospective accounts written by former colonial officials, I explore how ideas of service and duty were understood within the Service. Until the end of recruitment these remained conditioned upon assumptions of class and gender, which determined who was deemed suitable to exercise authority during the late empire. What emerges are a series of contradictions that went to the heart of Colonial Service identity and that made a colonial career appear increasingly anachronistic in the context of late 1950s Britain.

Stepping back from the specifics of Colonial Service recruitment, the second half of the chapter situates a colonial career within the broader cultural landscape of 1950s Britain to examine how changing ideas of service and duty among Britain's social elite meant that fewer and fewer were convinced the empire offered a meaningful, or attractive, career option. The chapter concludes by briefly considering one alternative way in which young Britons embarked upon service overseas. Overseas voluntary organizations, principal among which was Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), helped to fill the void left by the end of a Colonial Service career, but in so doing relied upon networks and institutional entanglements forged during the final decade of the colonial project.

A gentlemanly service? The Colonial Service after 1945

If the growing size of the Colonial Service is anything to judge by, even in the late 1950s few British officials had any inkling as to the strength of the wind about to blow through Africa. Throughout the twentieth century the Colonial Service remained the bureaucratic backbone of British colonial authority, and, as such, an integral part of the colonial state.[26] In the aftermath of the Second World War it underwent unprecedented expansion in both size and ambition as the Colonial Office sought

to realize its revised mission, announced in 1943 by the Conservative Secretary of State for the colonies, Oliver Stanley, to guide 'Colonial peoples along the road to self-government within the framework of the British Empire' through partnership, progress and development.[27] This policy gained new scope, impetus and, most importantly, funding under the post-war Labour government.[28] With the arrival of Arthur Creech Jones at the Colonial Office in 1946, the old orthodoxies of indirect rule and trusteeship stood ready to be swept aside through a vast, transformative developmental initiative.[29]

Characterized by John Lonsdale as 'the second colonial occupation', the Colonial Service expanded from some 7,000 European officers in 1936 (of a total cadre of 200,000) to 11,000 in 1947 (of 300,000) and to 18,000 in 1956.[30] Across an increasingly diverse range of fields, the Service sought to harness technocratic expertise to facilitate the economic, material, political and civic development of colonial societies in preparation for self-government.[31] Unsurprisingly, this change of emphasis was never intended as a purely altruistic act to precipitate the steady winding down of colonial power.[32] Rather, colonial development offered a means to salvage the reputation of colonialism in the face of growing international criticism and Cold War pressure, as well as to boost Britain's stuttering economy in the aftermath of the war. Few policy-makers or officials saw a fundamental contradiction in these aims, confident that British expertise could bring material progress both at home and across empire.

Before 1939, and in the immediate aftermath of the war, Sir Ralph Furse dominated recruitment to all branches. He had worked in the Colonial Office since 1910 and served as director of recruitment from 1931 to 1948. After the First World War Furse's concern that the Colonial Service's reputation compared badly to the Indian Civil Service and Sudan Political Service drove him to raise its profile among the group whose applications he most coveted, the upper middle-class gentleman. To attract applicants, he relied upon a close network of public school and Oxbridge talent spotters to flag up likely candidates, followed by a personal interview at the Colonial Office.[33] This ensured a large degree of homogeneity in the type of individual who applied, as well as offering Furse the opportunity to probe 'the imponderables of character'.[34]

Furse's ideal colonial official, and DO in particular, fitted a clear mould: educated at public school and Oxbridge, preferably with a family member who had served overseas, physically fit and good all-round 'officer material'. This ensured that the Colonial Service's institutional ethos aligned with the core values of the English gentleman: amateur,

sporty, self-controlled and, broadly, conservative in outlook. To critics, this list translated as incompetent, unintelligent, sexually repressed and reactionary. Until the mid-1950s, though, the figure of the gentleman not only received wide public acclaim but was considered by many commentators to be the epitome of Englishness.[35] Central to gentlemen's claim to constitute a natural ruling elite, at home and in empire, was a discourse of service and duty. Since the mid-nineteenth century this had oriented around the patriotic constellation of Crown, nation and empire.[36] Nebulous qualities of character and a spirit of fair play, learnt on the sports pitches of school and college, made the gentleman a dutiful defender of the underdog (or peasant African) but also imparted the moral courage required to ensure unflinching resolve in his duty to uphold British prestige.[37] Of course, this ideal rarely translated into reality, but that should not detract from its influence on Furse's vision for the type of man he believed should stand as the bedrock of the British empire.[38] Even among those who had not attended a public school, of whom there were more after 1945, this remained the proclaimed archetype towards which to aspire.[39] Furse's vision found affirmation in print, and subsequently on screen, where the DO was typically conjured as bronzed, taciturn and morally steadfast. Clad in pristine white, khaki safari suit and pith helmet, to audiences across Britain these figures became the embodiment of British colonial power.[40]

Sabine Clarke has rightly observed that this stereotype's enduring traction has too often blinded historians to the growing diversity of the Colonial Service after 1945.[41] In probing beneath the Colonial Service's much-proclaimed *esprit de corps*, Christopher Prior reveals a richer array of opinions and characters than the uniformity so celebrated in hindsight suggests.[42] Rapid expansion after 1945 led to a greater mix of backgrounds among recruits. This was particularly true in the technical services, but also affected the profile of the Colonial Administrative Service (CAS). In contrast to the 1930s, when 77 per cent of recruits came from schools belonging to the Headmasters' Conference, between 1947 and 1956 this proportion dropped to 57 per cent. Among agricultural scholars, the split was almost equal. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it is also important to stress the impact of the huge increase in the number of women appointed after 1945, an area that requires further attention.[43]

Change was slow, however. For much of the 1950s those in senior positions were members of the CAS appointed by Furse, who often found it difficult to reconcile their own experience in the colonies with the new expectations being articulated in London after the Second World War. This created a tension that went to the heart of the Colonial Service's

identity: it could embrace the new technocratic agenda but, in so doing, diminish the role of the CAS; or it could resist London's modernizing proclamations, to reassert the traditional authority of the DO, who knew best *his* district and what *his* Africans most needed.[44] The result was an unhappy compromise that satisfied few.

Resistant modernizers: Colonial Service recruitment during the 1950s

As the 1950s progressed, the Colonial Office took care to present a modernizing and progressive empire, not as a crutch to fading British power but of service to humanity at large. Yet it still stressed a sense of duty and sacrifice, embedded in upper middle-class identity.[45] In preparation for a recruitment lecture at Cambridge in 1952 entitled 'The Colonial Service: my job', the organizer suggested: 'The general theme might well be: a life of difficulties, frequent disappointment and uphill work amidst environments which are often unfavourable, but offering a challenge which we, as a Nation, are called upon to meet, and a job which is infinitely worthwhile.'[46] Even more forthrightly, a 1955 recruitment poster pronounced it 'a worthwhile career for a man who is not entirely self-seeking'.[47] A declared commitment to the (exceedingly) steady progress towards a multiracial Commonwealth ensured that such pronouncements carried a distinctive inflection compared to those made a generation earlier.

Recruitment publicity echoed this point. Bradley was not alone in adopting typically Whiggish tones to remind potential applicants that they were just as beholden to ensure the successful transformation of empire into a multiracial Commonwealth as their predecessors had been to 'build' it in the first place. A 1956 report outlining how serving officers should approach recruitment lectures at schools stressed:

> The vital point is that men are still wanted and there is a job to be done which is worth doing. There may be risks attached to it, and there are few jobs worth having which are entirely without risks, but there are opportunities also and above all the opportunity of assisting, not as some would have it, in the closing down of the colonies but in the development of the Commonwealth.[48]

The Colonial Office's message was clear: while the basic role of a colonial officer might be changing, this did not mean that the transition to self-government should endanger long-term career prospects.

Pre-deployment training was remodelled so as better to prepare officers for the challenges of managing a 'modern empire'. Lectures in economics, anthropology and history stressed that colonial peoples were not 'primitive' or 'backward' but 'underdeveloped' and that recruits' primary role would be to assist in the development of colonial societies.[49] All officers, regardless of which branch they served in, were expected to bring expertise that would further this process and should expect to work alongside educated Africans in preparation for self-government. Contemporary and retrospective accounts testify that this message started to resonate among recruits. Although this was often conditioned on the assumption that self-government remained some years off – a sense always corroborated by senior officers – a growing number stressed their desire to undertake 'worthwhile service' in helping indigenous people to 'run their own affairs' or assist in the development of 'emergent nations'.[50]

Recruiters envisaged this spirit of friendship and progress forming the basis of relations between colonial officers and local people. After 1945 the Colonial Office showed itself well aware of the need to tackle the instinctive racism underpinning many of the axioms of trusteeship and indirect rule.[51] Although this did nothing to curtail the racialized violence that often characterized the run-up to independence, nor challenge entrenched views among senior officers or white settler communities in Africa, it did lead to greater scrutiny of applicants' attitudes to race. Recruiters and training supervisors were quick to praise those recruits with 'progressive' attitudes. Many training reports recorded with satisfaction efforts by cadets to surmount racial divisions by cultivating friendships with African students or locally recruited cadets also on the course. These attitudes, recruiters believed, were vital to securing the bonds of intimacy required to bind the Commonwealth together in perpetuity.

Yet, even as public proclamations suggested a changing dynamic, entrenched attitudes among serving officers undermined efforts to connect with a younger generation. For all the talk of a new technocratic era, the Colonial Service never fully embraced the post-war agenda. Senior officers, almost all of whom had risen through the ranks of the district administration, remained loath to surrender the DO's pre-eminence in favour of a new technocratic elite, believing that technical expertise or knowledge of Africa still mattered less than character and conditioning. Recruiters consistently reaffirmed their enduring faith in the solid over the spectacular, championing the 'dependable', 'hard-working', 'well-mannered' and 'healthy' all-rounder. While many recruits gained praise for their willingness to engage with the abstract problems of colonial

administration, this was always deemed a bonus rather than essential. 'Secretariat type' remained loaded with sneering inference, just as 'ideal bush officer' carried high praise.

Appearance, as a mark of underlying character, had always carried great weight in assessing applicants, and this continued into the 1960s. Officers were expected to be outgoing and sporty and to exert an air of effortless authority. Those who cultivated a less fastidious appearance or lacked the confidence and poise of the public school prefect or 'officer type' found it far harder to win the affirmation of recruiters. One undergraduate who enquired as to the possibility of applying was cryptically dismissed as 'might be arty and "international"', another as '[p]olitically minded – doubtful'.[52] This often went hand in hand with assumptions about class background and political inclination. One bearded grammar school recruit, who had also attended a redbrick university, was assessed by his interviewer:

> I doubt…if he has been suitably realistic in considering whether the actual life and work is what would suit him; my feeling is that he may be rather given to facile enthusiasms rather than analysis and reflection… He is also a member of the United Nations Students Association and is very interested in work of this kind… I would like to have seen him without his beard but nevertheless he appears quite civilised.[53]

Interviewers often assumed that applicants from 'working-class backgrounds' would have a 'chip on their shoulder', or worried that they might be angry young men with subversive views on empire. If they *were* appointed, it was stressed that they should be sent to a strict district commissioner to be 'toughened up'.

Concerns over appearance acted as a proxy for deeper fears about whether those recruits who lacked the traditional conditioning would be able to cope with the realities of daily life as a DO or adapt to the social atmosphere of the colonies. In contrast, the 'right kind of background' frequently compensated for other deficiencies. Most sought after were those with family connections to overseas service. In recommending two candidates in 1950, the supervisor on the Cambridge training course, a former DO, observed: 'X has all the background of family service and the sincerity of thought that we could desire… What I liked especially about these two was the absence of materialism in their idea of the Service as a career.'[54] More importantly for many recruiters, these candidates were seen to bring a 'grounded and realistic' outlook to their job. These

apprehensions linked inextricably to the growing political uncertainty surrounding the colonial project. Many senior officers continued to see the maintenance of law and order as taking priority over unduly hastening the process towards self-government through citizenship or mass education schemes, and that required tough, level-headed young men, not 'starry-eyed do-gooders'.[55]

Schoolmasters and college tutors remained well aware of these priorities. Echoing their interwar counterparts, referees highlighted outdoor interests, sports or an 'adventurous spirit', but moral leadership and honesty still counted for most.[56] Indicative of the general tone is one college tutor's reference for a public-school- and Cambridge-educated applicant in 1960:

> [H]e is not by any means brilliant academically. But on the other hand, he is a very charming man, full of the social graces and with a great mass of common sense. He is possibly the sort of man who can be described as 'the salt of the earth'… I think that he is the sort of man who, while not brilliant, would make a very steady and reliable administrator. He is scrupulously honest, kind and humble, and I take pleasure in recommending him for an appointment.[57]

While direct reference to an applicant's 'gentlemanly credentials' gradually faded away, thinly veiled class inferences bubbled between the lines. 'Salt of the earth' evoked a modern gentleman of the meritocratic age, able to operate among all types of people but still defined by incontrovertible virtues of honesty, common sense and self-restraint.[58]

By tracing the efforts to attract new recruits during the post-war period we can begin to map the gap between the Colonial Service's rhetorical positioning and what this meant in practice. Attempts to explain the Service's role at the end of empire to a domestic audience exposed contradictions that went to the heart of the late colonial state. While a new inflection emphasized Commonwealth over empire, this endorsement was never unconditional. Misgivings over the pace of change reflected senior officers' resentment at having 'their service' overhauled by London bureaucrats. In this respect, the idea of 'duty' at the end of empire still accentuated patriotic and institutional obligations over the broader humanitarian emphasis that was starting to be heard more regularly across wider British culture. Recruits had to understand that their role was to maintain order and implement the decisions of their senior officers, not to set off on a reforming crusade.[59] As had always been the case, the call to 'service' remained demarcated by carefully bounded

limits. Many recruits chafed against these restrictions, but in the increasingly turbulent atmosphere of late empire senior officers would not compromise hard-headed realism for idealistic sentiment.

Still a job to be done? Service, duty and British culture during decolonization

If the recourse to a 'gentlemanly code' had been intended to assuage fears among a traditional audience, it largely failed. Nor did it resonate loudly enough with the new meritocratic elite reaching adulthood in the era of universal secondary education and the welfare state. Frustratingly, records of rejected applicants no longer survive. Nor is it possible to establish with any clarity why an individual chose *not* to apply. Nonetheless, from the extant records, it seems clear that the Colonial Service's institutional ethos not only determined the type of individual appointed but, just as significantly, heavily influenced who applied in the first place. As in many other areas of British culture after 1945, ideas of service, duty and character took on a more democratic inflection, becoming less associated with *noblesse oblige* and more with service to humanity at large.[60] For those considering their career options in the late 1950s, empire could still represent an exciting, exotic and idealistic outlet for ambitions that could not be realized in the restrictive climate of home.[61] Even as the Colonial Office persisted with long-established recruitment strategies, appealing to their traditional audience, many individuals sought a colonial career for reasons far more nuanced than a straightforward commitment to Britain's ongoing colonial status. When imagining the future career possibilities available in empire, many accepted that fundamental change was coming but also that the chance to play a part in that process, whatever it might involve, was a risk worth taking.

Colonial Office efforts were stepped up to reassure an increasingly sceptical audience of undergraduates, parents, school and university authorities alike that long-term, attractive career opportunities remained on offer.[62] H. H. McCleery, supervisor on the Cambridge Colonial Service training course, noted that fears over job security held heavy sway over potential undergraduate applicants: 'My experience has been that they are chiefly afraid of the political uncertainty. A man may have a keen sense of mission, and yet shrink from committing himself to a job which may turn bad on him while he is still in the early 30s…'[63] Even at the very end of the decade, interviewers promised at least ten to fifteen

years' service. While several recruits remember these assurances sounding unrealistically optimistic at the time, they remained in line with government timetables for withdrawal from East Africa by the mid-1970s.[64] Revealingly, the word 'career' was not removed from publicity posters until 1959, only three years before recruitment stopped, and even then the move sparked an angry response from senior officers fearful of the effect on applicants.[65]

Nevertheless, despite these efforts, recruitment rates continued to decline. The Colonial Service's dependence upon networks rooted in a narrow social clique meant that peer and personal affirmation was frequently crucial in directing individuals towards an application. Once parents, teachers and college tutors sensed a decline in career opportunities, or serving officers fed back negative criticism, the entire recruitment structure began to crumble. Similar problems had paralysed Indian Civil Service recruitment in the 1920s.[66] By the mid-1950s morale among serving officers was in sharp decline, leading to growing numbers of resignations and frustrated letters to British newspapers. Perhaps most damagingly, serving officers increasingly warned potential applicants, including their own children, not to apply.[67] Recruitment talks at universities drew ever smaller audiences, and even then a significant proportion attended in order to heckle over oppressive policies in Africa.[68] The university appointments boards confirmed mounting undergraduate reluctance to apply, and by the end of the decade declared themselves no longer prepared to promote the Colonial Service.[69]

Elite career patterns did undergo a noteworthy shift during the 1950s. Full employment, and the gradual phasing out of national service after 1957, allowed for a more relaxed attitude towards finding a career.[70] Traditional service careers became less popular, with fewer entering the armed forces, clergy or civil services, while the number joining business or engineering firms grew significantly.[71] Opportunities to fulfil such roles overseas proliferated, often promising better terms of service than those offered by the Colonial Service.[72] Contract terms gave individuals welcome flexibility while allowing them to accrue experience that would only increase future employability. In contrast, many young colonial officers who joined the Service in the early 1950s with the expectation of a full career increasingly feared that their experience in empire would leave them poorly placed to find new employment in Britain only a decade later.[73]

In the post-war climate, professional competence and technocratic expertise became the maxims of the new meritocracy; ability rather than conditioning would determine individual opportunity.[74]

Following the expansion of the grammar schools under the 1944 Education Act, by the mid-1950s a growing number from outside the upper middle class proceeded to higher education.[75] Often labelled 'angry young men' by those such as Colonial Service interviewers, this group built a mounting critique of the gentlemanly ruling elite in the early 1950s, which erupted into visceral hostility following the Suez Crisis. Voices from across the political spectrum lambasted and lampooned the gentlemanly creed as antediluvian and anachronistic, without relevance to modern British life.[76] The empire caste drew particular ire in these attacks, further fuelled by the series of 'colonial scandals' that broke in the late 1950s.[77] Certainly, some grammar school recruits found the Service's institutional ethos infuriating. For Elwyn Thomas, agricultural officer turned novelist, the whole service could be scathingly dismissed as 'middle class from top to bottom, an outlet for the minor public schoolman, with his home in the suburbs – the parson's son, the axed army officer's, using it as a ladder to improve himself socially, with its artificial air of gracious living and its milk-round of orders and decorations. And how they love it!'[78] Nonetheless, it is important not to exaggerate a sense of rupture.[79] As the changing profile of Colonial Service recruits after 1945 highlights, a significant number of grammar-school-educated and redbrick graduates gained appointments and went on to build successful careers across all colonial territories. Problematically, however, they never applied in sufficient numbers to satisfy demand, while at the same time public school applicants also started to dwindle.[80]

Far from being unresponsive to the destabilizing climate of decolonization, the public schools' ethos during the 1950s and 1960s reflected a carefully crafted compromise. Contrary to the picture of moribund inertia that characterizes many depictions after 1945, they successfully met the dual challenges posed by the breakdown of empire and rising social mobility. By the late 1950s the most forward-thinking (and financially secure) institutions acknowledged that, to retain significance in the changing educational landscape, they had to reappraise core elements of their ethos.[81] As they became less preoccupied with their role as nurseries of empire, so they placed less emphasis on a gentlemanly code of character, sport and manners.[82] The focus fell instead on the need to retool elite young men to withstand emerging challenges at home, while seizing new overseas opportunities beyond the limits of empire. This did not entail the abandonment of their traditional values but, rather, their evolution to ensure relevance for a generation that did not take imperial status for granted and appeared intent on questioning the orthodoxies of their parents.[83]

Imperial achievements remained enshrined within the fabric of school buildings and traditions while leadership and character were preserved as core qualities, and it remained expected that ambition should lead public school boys to positions of power and influence. Yet little overt mention of colonial affairs appeared in the day-to-day culture of the schools, while an ambivalent shrug rather than any great outcry greeted decolonization. Time-honoured summons to imperial duty were dismissed with growing irreverence; *The Monmouthian* reported facetiously, in 1954, that one Colonial Service recruit was currently undergoing training 'to be a better bearer of the white man's burden'.[84] Debates on imperial controversies barely surfaced but, when they did, tended to endorse moves towards a Commonwealth of nations.[85] School magazines reported virtually nothing on colonial crises, while reports from old boys living overseas became an increasing rarity. Although the Colonial Office remained committed to sending the occasional speaker to talk on Colonial Service careers, so did many other organizations looking to attract public school recruits. School culture never lost its tone of reactionary, nostalgic conservatism, but when pupils became animated their focus was invariably domestic. Censorship, university access, sexual morals, the position of the public schools in the education system or class more generally all received and provoked far greater interest than the end of empire.[86]

Headmasters sought to prepare young men for a post-imperial future with greater competition from across society. Boys were still wholeheartedly encouraged to retain broad horizons and to view the world as an open field of opportunity; the end of empire did not mean that Britain's global role was over, and certainly should not, as one headmaster warned, predicate a retreat into a parochial 'tending of his own back garden'.[87] Yet the fact that these would not be within the nexus of empire was not something to be lamented.[88] Luminaries at speech days acknowledged that the empire project was changing but saw this as something to celebrate. This did not mean a cleavage with older traditions but, rather, their natural evolution into future triumphs. Returning to his old school, Haileybury, in 1957, Clement Attlee, Labour prime minister from 1945 to 1951, was careful to make this point:

> The old imperialism which flourished when I was here has changed its character and now we have a great Commonwealth of Nations – and I believe that the old Haileyburians of the East India College would have seen that as the fruition and not the frustration of its work. But it certainly does not mean that there is no need now for people to go out to the ends of the earth. There is that need. It is

just as great as ever, although sometimes the work to be done is on rather a different plane – not so much ordering people about as co-operating – and I believe we shall still find Old-Haileyburians all over the world.[89]

The message was clear. For a new generation of elite schoolboys, just as eager as their predecessors had been to experience and exploit opportunities across the globe, the end of empire did not have to necessitate the abandonment of personal ambition. Rather, it merely required an adjustment of attitude and new emphasis on humanity rather than empire.[90]

VSO: from ageing service to young man's challenge

The Colonial Office never wavered in its promise of a career offering enterprising young people variety, a sense of service and adventure. These attractions did not evaporate upon the climax of empire, nor did schools cease to produce the type of character who had formed the mainstay of recruits throughout the twentieth century. So, what openings emerged to replace the void left by the disappearance of a career in empire? The late 1950s saw a blossoming of a student volunteer movement, which included growing numbers volunteering overseas.[91] While this reflected a wider global trend, the origins of Britain's largest overseas volunteer organization, VSO, demonstrated especially close links to the late colonial state.[92] This is not to suggest that volunteer schemes were based upon a desire to perpetuate colonialism, though some levelled these criticisms at the time. Nonetheless, as Jordanna Bailkin's recent portrait of VSO deftly sketches, its founding ideology drew upon long-established themes within the Colonial Service's recruitment message but sought to reconfigure these in order to energize a new generation of Britons to undertake service overseas.[93] It is within this process of evolution and realignment – of which VSO offers one glimpse – that we can start to explore the entanglements that shaped the cultural landscape of decolonization.[94]

Voluntary Service Overseas was founded in 1958. The creation of former Colonial Service official Alec Dickson, it was intended to provide elite school leavers with the opportunity to undertake a year's voluntary work overseas before they started university. He feared that the vacuum left by the end of national service and the growth of the welfare state would inhibit young people's development into responsible citizens by

closing off opportunities to undertake service for others or to mix with those from different backgrounds.[95] But he also believed that the end of empire would deprive young people of a valuable outlet for these ideals, a concern held by other colonial officials at the time. When writing in *The Times*, Dickson quoted one serving officer:

> Twenty years ago they would have been an obvious choice for an Assistant District Officer. Now of course he is more likely to become a History master at a school in Britain… I only hope the contracting of bounds of empire do not cut off such young men and the people of other races from mutual co-operation.[96]

Family connections to overseas service shaped Dickson's own background. His father had been a civil engineer working across the globe, while his older brother joined the Colonial Education Service in North Borneo. Having started a career in journalism in the 1930s, Dickson served in East Africa during the Second World War, where he launched a mobile propaganda unit aimed at buttressing British support among the local population.[97] After returning to Europe to participate in more resettlement work, he joined the Colonial Service in 1948, and was posted to West Africa as a social development officer, where he remained until 1954.[98] In this role, he participated in a number of mass education and community development training schemes, intended to inculcate leadership and teamwork values, which the Colonial Office identified as essential to shaping responsible citizens in preparation for self-government.[99]

The philosophy Dickson developed during this time informed much of his subsequent trajectory.[100] He believed vehemently that the optimism, energy and innocence of youth represented the surest means of breaking down racial and cultural barriers in a decolonizing world.[101] In so doing, individuals gained through selfless service to others.[102] Dickson was convinced that the era of 'development' could not be successful if it relied only upon 'expatriate expertise' or impersonal aid packages. It required instead a process of reciprocal teaching and friendship between European and local elites; development had to rely upon human interaction to tackle the mundane problems of daily life.[103] At the heart of his philosophy stood an amateur ideal, which ran against prevailing technocratic trends but emphasized the same ethos of worthwhile service to others proclaimed in Colonial Service publicity and which reflected Dickson's own educational background at public school and Oxford during the interwar years.[104]

Dickson first approached the Colonial Office in 1956, hopeful that his vision would chime with their focus upon community development and ideas of Commonwealth. Although he was not rejected outright, he met with considerable circumspection.[105] Wary of sending a young, untrained cadre of volunteers into increasingly politically unstable societies, many in the Colonial Office preferred to rely upon trained experts rather than well-meaning amateurs.[106] Dickson's personal reputation within the Service was equally problematic.[107] Failing to find the affirmation or financial support required, he turned instead to missionary groups already engaged in development work overseas, and in early 1958 persuaded the Bishop of Portsmouth to pledge his support in an open letter to *The Sunday Times*.[108]

VSO conspicuously and deliberately eschewed any mention of, or allusion to, colonialism; Portsmouth couched his appeal in the same language that had come to dominate Colonial Service recruitment literature, however. These opportunities would be of 'inestimable benefit to the development of the Commonwealth' and provide the foundations for mutual respect between the peoples of newly self-governing nations and Britain. At the root of the proposal lay an acclamation of the value of humanitarian service: 'Equally urgent is the need for the best of our young people – in their difficult period of transition before university or career – to have the opportunity of doing something worthwhile, where it is most genuinely needed, and seeing a bit of the world into the bargain.'[109] In articulating a new vision of British engagement with the wider world, VSO clearly distinguished itself from the colonial state; volunteers would not be taught to govern arrogantly but to better themselves through immersion in a new culture and working alongside peoples who were their equals.[110]

Nonetheless, in a variety of ways, Dickson's Colonial Service connections were essential to establishing VSO.[111] When identifying projects, he found ready support among more progressive officers, who helped arrange placements across five territories for the first batch of volunteers. Following initial success, VSO quickly grew in popularity and ambition, and by the early 1960s it was receiving over 1,000 applications per year.[112] Two more former colonial officers were appointed to expand Dickson's one-man show and assist with day-to-day administration.[113] Edward Chadwick became deputy director, having previously been pivotal in pioneering community development programmes in Nigeria, where he had also been Dickson's superior.[114] Another ex-Nigeria DO, Gilbert Stephenson, was charged with developing the public affairs and fundraising operation.[115] Its governing council exhibited a similar

profusion of colonial connections. Although VSO began without any formal government support, the Colonial Office quickly offered its implicit endorsement. The Secretary of State for the colonies, Alan Lennox-Boyd, received the first volunteers at the Colonial Office before their departure and remained an active and enthusiastic supporter.[116] Following the success of the first year, however, the British government offered more significant patronage. In 1959 the Colonial Office provided a £9,000 grant and helped expand the scope of placements across the Commonwealth.[117]

It quickly became clear that VSO targeted the same social elite that had formed the bulwark of Colonial Service recruits. Dickson and his colleagues relied on ready access to public school networks to generate interest, with the first eighteen volunteers coming from public schools. Although the background of recruits expanded in the second year, with a roughly equal split between public and grammar school pupils, VSO remained an elite concept and organization.[118] *The Daily Express* did not miss this point, noting in 1959 that it was 'an organization for public school and grammar school boys'.[119] Volunteers were selected according to criteria that bore remarkable resemblance to Colonial Service recruitment procedure, and, indeed, during the early years included a retired Colonial Service resident on its interview panel.[120] Personal references lauded precisely the same qualities considered so important among colonial administrators.[121] Reviewing the second year of service in 1959, *The Times* included examples of several testimonials, written by headmasters, that most certainly would have won the approval of a Colonial Service selection board: 'Head of school, captain of rugger; cricket and boxing colours; leader of school orchestra, chairman of art society; under-officer, Combined Cadet Force. A boy of strong character, moral and physical courage, integrity and vision; is shrewd, mature, versatile and energetic.'[122] Promoting its initial success, a VSO publicity release celebrated the 'very high standard of volunteer' and reminded readers that '[h]alf of those volunteering for the first projects had been head boys who had already won open scholarships'.[123]

Despite fundamental differences between an application to the Colonial Service and a year or two spent on VSO, volunteers' experiences had much in common with what an earlier generation eagerly anticipated upon an application to the Colonial Service.[124] All recruits wrote letters back to Dickson, which became publicity to attract more young adventurous volunteers, promising experiences that Stephenson likened to the lot of a DO.[125] But relying so heavily on former colonial officers to implement a radical new philosophy quickly exposed tensions between paternalistic ideas of service among an older generation and the new emphasis on

friendship. In 1961 the British Council complained over Stephenson's monthly newsletter, reporting that volunteers in Ghana had been angered by his 'smug and self-congratulatory' tone, which 'tended to suggest that people overseas were comic and extraordinary'. Stephenson's background as an interwar DO came to the fore as he commented on 'darkest Ethiopia' and Thomas Gray's *Ode on a distant prospect of Eton College* and endorsed a quotation from a volunteer in Bechuanaland: 'The minds of the people are those of children who need help desperately if they are to take on the responsibilities of what are to them at the moment merely romantic dreams, not even political ideals.'[126]

British Council entreaties stressed that, for VSO to be a success in newly independent nation states, it was 'absolutely fundamental' that volunteers and organizers alike accepted those among whom they volunteered as 'dignified human being[s], and the equal of the white man in every respect'. Any trace of 'patronage or condescension or ridicule' would undermine the entire basis of overseas voluntary service, as '[t]he African is no longer prepared to be done good to by people who do not in every way show that they accept him as an equal'.[127] Moving slowly beyond the established parameters of colonial rule to construct new relationships between young Britons and indigenous people took time and adaptation. For all the innovation that Dickson's vision promised, it also suggested the possibility for a continuation of more traditional perspectives. Despite some initial grumbling among colonial governors that VSO recruits were ill-suited to the challenges of colonial territories, the general impression is that many officers responded well to the injection of youth.[128] Nonetheless, just as former Colonial Service officers had to adapt to new and uncertain terrain, so young Britons were also able to start to explore the new dynamics and relationships made possible in a postcolonial world.

The presence of independent-minded teenagers prepared to challenge (or ignore) entrenched social and racial protocols exposed deeper tensions between the volunteers and an older generation of expatriate Britons living across colonial and newly independent territories.[129] One volunteer outraged the governor's wife in Sarawak by arriving for dinner at the residency dressed in a sarong, but the dispatch of the first female volunteers in 1961 sparked new points of concern, particularly surrounding their interactions with local men.[130] In Malaya, the local Anglican archbishop complained to Dickson at one female volunteer's behaviour, while another sent in 1962 was reported to the high commissioner for having an 'affair' with a local Sikh man. Despite being interviewed about her behaviour she remained resolute that she had nothing to be ashamed

about, and, when asked what her parents would think, responded that 'they do know and raised no objection'. In spite of the accusations, the volunteer made an overall favourable impression, with the high commissioner observing traits for which many a male colonial officer had won praise: '[S]he is the least volatile of the girls, calm, intelligent and serious… She is obviously the only girl in the party likely to have taken "A" level in pure and applied maths.'[131]

Indeed, many volunteers appeared determined to challenge local preconceptions by conspicuously disassociating themselves from the pomp of the colonial period. In a newspaper interview with the *Malay Mail*, the aforementioned volunteer made it clear that she wanted to challenge Malays' 'two dimensional view of Britain – all pomp and pageantry and straw cottages' which had been so rigorously maintained by the colonial elite: 'I had to assure them there is a seamy side to Britain too. It really meant tearing down some pretty solidly built illusions.'[132] Records testifying to volunteers' motivation or their post-university careers are not readily available.[133] Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that at least two 1959 VSO volunteers joined the Colonial Service, with McCleery praising one's idealism, progressive racial attitude and the galvanizing effect of his year in Sarawak.[134] A third VSO volunteer, also appointed to Northern Rhodesia in 1961, withdrew because he did not think Africa somewhere to take his fiancée; all his referees drew attention to the 'sense of vocation' he had gained through his volunteering, however.[135] Even so, a somewhat cynical response from his Colonial Service interviewers wondered whether his 'idealism' and 'sincerity' masked a 'naivety' and lack of 'toughness' that would prove problematic in the field.[136]

Conclusions

In 1962 Sir Ralph Furse published his memoirs. For a title, he chose the name of a mythical Greek bird snarer, *Aucuparius*, and in elegiac tones acclaimed the system he had created and the Colonial Service as he wanted it remembered. At the book's heart ran a paean to the gentlemanly code of service and duty that defined Furse's essential sense of empire.[137] Like the title, however, his central theme sat uncomfortably in the context of early 1960s Britain, its nostalgia for a vanishing empire in stark contrast to Anthony Sampson's contemporaneous dissection of a calcifying nation. Furse received positive reviews in the conservative press, particularly from former colonial governors,[138] but others were already more circumspect.

Writing a year later, a former Kenya DO, John Nottingham, eloquently exposed the flaws at the heart of Furse's '*apologia*':

> It is arguable that had our colonial civil servants been less snobbish and paternal, had they been selected for their brains rather than their 'character', such disasters as the emergencies in Kenya and Nyasaland would have been avoided. Sir Ralph and the Oxford clique have much to answer for. Their manifest good intentions may not be a sufficient plea in mitigation.[139]

The tensions and contradictions that stood at the heart of the Colonial Service's ethos after 1945 produced competing visions for what shape the future should take. Ultimately, recruiters' staunch attachment to long-established tropes of character and conditioning sat uncomfortably within the changing domestic climate, making it impossible for the Colonial Service to adapt successfully to the waning of imperial power.

The same year also saw the end of Dickson's association with VSO following a series of clashes with Whitehall over future ambitions. Even as a further 243 volunteers were dispatched to forty-nine territories across the globe, the arrival of President Kennedy's newly formed Peace Corps made many in Westminster worry that Dickson's amateur ideal was simply not adequate for the United Nations' Decade of Development. Throughout the 1960s VSO's reliance on government funding grew, and with the increased funding came increased pressure to refocus on graduate volunteers and technocratic expertise.[140] Even so, the promise of service to others, adventure and unique experiences overseas continued to hold as much appeal to young audiences as careers in empire had for a previous generation. Interestingly, the funding of VSO schemes in the twenty-first century was proposed by the Overseas Service Pensioners Association as one strategy to rehabilitate the colonial record '[i]n view of the fact that the ideals and motives of people who wanted to serve overseas were very much the same'.[141]

VSO, as embodied in Dickon's philosophy, gave voice to a particular vision of the future that some Colonial Service officers imagined possible, though could not accommodate. The links between the two organizations, both conceptually and tangibly, emphasize the ways in which this was a future imagined on the basis of a changing empire, and one that sought to underline the constant of duty amidst a turbulent climate. These physical and mental entanglements ensured that the end of empire was not the final point of decolonization, and,

instead, demonstrate one way in which vast interconnected networks of power, spanning Britain, her former colonies and the many individual lives shaped through this association, would endure in new ways. Continuing today, VSO has so far sent over 50,000 volunteers to undertake 'worthwhile service' overseas.